

Planting . . . To The Ends of the Earth!

Thoughts from the Acts of the Apostles

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Back to School!

It happens every year at the end of the summer. Kids go back to school: first timers to kindergarten, freshmen to high school, and young adults to college. It is a time that can be thrilling, chilling, and blooming. Your church start should be as exciting!

Luke wrote to *Theophilus* in both his gospel account and in the book of Acts. Theophilus means "God lover" or "God-beloved." In his gospel account Luke wrote, "It also seemed good to me, having carefully investigated everything from the first, to write to you in orderly sequence, most honorable Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things about which you have been instructed" (Luke 1:3-4). We see that Theophilus was a catechumen, one being instructed and a person who loved the Lord.

As we begin our look at how a leader prepares for planting a new work, the planter must become as Theophilus – always capable of learning and having the desire to be a "quick study" who is eager for instruction. Whether you are a church planter, a new leader in a new church start, or a member of a new work team in some vital role, those who know you should declare that you are unashamedly a lover of God.

There is a lot of talking, writing, conversation and activity around Acts 1:8 – "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." The focus is great!

In my personal study of the Acts of the Apostles over the last four years I have come to see the fascinating and intriguing accounts of the early church as years of preparation and readiness for all that is stated in that eighth verse. It is a declaration that the time is coming when "you will be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth."

There were many issues to be dealt with. Jesus had spent less than three years with the disciples as a teaching-learning body. At best, they were just introduced to the great task that lay before them. In three different settings, the gospels record how Jesus labored to teach the disciples about his passion that was to come. We are sure that he must have spoken about his death, burial and resurrection on more occasions and yet, the disciples were surprised at all that took place. It was only after the resurrection that they seemed to deal with the prophetic path that had been established for the Christ. It was after the resurrection that they began to understand the teachings they had received from the lips of Jesus.

Luke introduces us to the education and preparation of the disciples for planting to the ends of the earth in the last chapter of his gospel. There we

read of the two individuals on the road to Emmaus who encountered Jesus as they walked. The key words in that encounter are: "And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:27).

The continuation of Luke's account states: "I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen" (Acts 1:1-2). Luke wants the reader to understand that Jesus knew his disciples were not ready in an instant following their realization of his resurrection. There were some critical learning issues that would have to be confronted and mastered before they began their journey to the ends of the earth.

The education the early Christians received was in the school of "hard knocks" as well as personal, spiritual learning from the risen Christ through the Holy Spirit. They not only learned and absorbed biblical truths, factual evidence from the living Jesus, but they had to journey through all the cultural, social and religious paradigms that had blinded them and the multitudes from seeing and understanding all that Jesus was and is about.

The Law and the Prophets had been the heart and soul of the disciples' belief system. The difficulty facing them was making a different set of glasses fit and getting their eyes to adjust so that they might see Jesus rather than Moses. They had lived with many generations of religious leadership enforcing the traditions of political, religious and social values, norms, and roles. The disciples of Jesus were men and women who not only accepted, but fully embraced the Mosaic systems of their world.

They were not fanatically bent on changing their world. They had embraced Jesus as their Messiah and were disappointed and shocked that he had not raised up an army to confront the Romans. It was going to take some time for them to sort out all that had happened and piece together all the teachings of Jesus to be an Acts 1:8 people. Yet in the power and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, men and women were changed, barriers were broken down, deep chasms of misunderstanding were bridged, and the gospel was delivered to a hostile pagan world. Not because men were capable, but because the Gospel "is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile."

Today's church planter pursues a courageous journey as the response to God's calling seizes the heart, mind, and soul. Much formal schooling is joined with hot passion as the planter gathers support and fellow sojourners. It is not unlike the passion of the disciples of Jesus before Gethsemane. There is much to learn. The planter and that nub of a core group being gathered must come to a deep understanding of their own values, norms, roles in the political, social and religious realms. Failure to understand and adequately address one's own paradigms destines one to making useless mistakes and creates a long, burdensome journey.

Understanding the people to whom the Lord has sent the planter is also essential. For most planters, the church planting experience is somewhat a cross-cultural experience. The danger is that of imposing pre-determined assumptions upon an indisposed and non-sympathetic audience whom the planter so passionately desires to reach for Jesus Christ.

Experience teaches us that with our best efforts the gospel has but a small opportunity of taking root. But with a humble spirit that serves those whom the heart desires to win, with a broken-heart and sincerity of compassion, the Lord will take that which is planted and watered, and will grow a church. The beginning of a long journey planting to the ends of the earth!